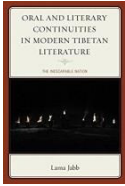


REVIEW: *ORAL AND LITERARY CONTINUITIES IN MODERN
TIBETAN LITERATURE: THE INESCAPABLE NATION*

Reviewed by Séagh Kehoe (*University of Nottingham*)



Lama Jabb. 2015. *Oral and Literary Continuities in Modern Tibetan Literature: The Inescapable Nation*. London: Lexington Books. ix + 277. Acknowledgements, index, bibliography, index, biography. ISBN 978-1498503334 (hardback 95.00USD; electronic 90.00USD).

Oral and Literary Continuities in Modern Tibet: The Inescapable Nation, Lama Jabb's contribution to *Studies in Modern Tibetan Culture* series, is the first book-length study in English to center the literary, cultural, and political roots of modern Tibetan literature. Written by Lama Jabb, born and raised in a herding community in Amdo and now a junior research fellow in Tibetan and Himalayan Studies at the University of Oxford, this ambitious landmark study offers an in-depth and meticulously researched examination of the persistence of Tibet's artistic and oral traditions in the literary creativity of the present. Spanning a wide-range of oral and literary texts, the book also draws attention to the deep and untiring concern for the Tibetan nation across modern Tibetan writing.

The book is neatly organized into seven chapters, along with acknowledgements, an extensive bibliography, index, and short biography of Lama Jabb himself. In 277 pages, it moves gracefully across a diverse and skillfully interwoven set of discussions of Tibetan music, the Tibetan tradition of social criticism, cultural traumas, the Third Generation of Tibetan poets, and contemporary Tibetan erotic poetry, all the while spotlighting literary legacies and the persistent preoccupation for with the Tibetan nation in modern Tibetan literature.

In the Introduction, Lama Jabb contextualizes his argument in what he notes to be a pervasive approach to modern Tibetan literature

that emphasizes the 1980s as its point of "'birth'." While acknowledging that the relatively liberal policies adopted by the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Chinese Communist Party Congress in 1978 led to a watershed moment in modern Tibetan literature, Lama Jabb problematizes the scholarly preoccupation with rupture and fissure that so often obscures and neglects the enduring legacies and continuity of traditional literary and oral forms. Using several examples of the ways in which *mgur*,¹ Indic poetics, Tibetan literary greats such as Gedun Choepel (1903-1951), and oral traditions, he demonstrates that these traditional forms continue to influence Tibetan writing today. Moreover, he also highlights the overwhelming concern with history, language, culture, and religion as a major theme in modern Tibetan literature.

Chapter Two examines modern Tibetan music and national identity. Lamenting the scholarly preoccupation with Tibetan Buddhism and the consequential neglect of contemporary Tibetan culture, Lama Jabb notes that popular songs have been an important channel for voicing both dissent and Tibetan patriotism under difficult political circumstances. He begins with a pithy and incisive discussion of nationalism. Critical of the highly state-centric approach of modernists, Lama Jabb opts for Anthony D Smith's (1939-2016) understanding of nationalism as "a collective cultural phenomenon" built on history, culture, music and literature, lived experience and so on (32). Through his close reading of contemporary song lyrics across three songs in the *dunglen* genre, he examines the various ways in which these modern musical forms fuse melodies with literary and vernacular language to narrate the Tibetan nation.

In Chapter Three, Lama Jabb explores the critical legacy of the Tibetan tradition of social criticism in modern Tibetan literature. Beginning with a brief outline of Tibet's critical tradition in which he details the influence of traditional Tibetan literary figures, *mgur*, and proverbs, Lama Jabb then delves into oral genres, focusing on the examples of the great Tibetan Gesar epic and romantic balladry. These, he notes, are particularly enduring elements of social criticism, whose

¹ *Mgur* denotes a type of Tibetan poem-song about spiritual experience or realization that may be oral or written in style.

influence continues to vividly manifest itself in the work of contemporary writers. In line with the central argument of the book, this chapter emphasizes the on-going and dynamic interplay between traditional Tibetan orality and modern literary creativity, and the importance of appreciating the artistic legacies of the past in the present.

Chapter Four examines the narration of cultural trauma in modern Tibetan literature and fiction. Focusing on Tsering Dhondup's novel *The Red Wind Screams*, Lama Jabb explores how the traumatic experiences in the early years of the People's Republic of China manifest themselves in modern Tibetan literature. He demonstrates how metaphors such as "red wind" and "wild yak" serve as "unifying imageries" for those who experienced those years, as well their descendants. These images serve to narrate the tragedy and horrors of the 1950s in a way that eclipses the radar of censors, while also reinforcing Tibetans' sense of collective identity. Keen to emphasize the ways in which oral narratives inform and shape these materials and contextualize contemporary artistic works, Lama Jabb also provides a summary of his mother's account of her tribe's encounter with the People's Liberation Army in 1958.

Chapter Five offers a fascinating overview of the emergence, development, and even partial demise of the Mi rabs gsum pa 'Third Generation' of Tibetan poets. Founded in 2005, this literary group distinguishes themselves from other authors of modern Tibetan poetry through their non-conformist, rebellious literary attitude that celebrates individuality, criticizes both traditional and colonial authority, and claims to abandon traditional forms of poetry. Yet, as Lama Jabb persuasively argues through his skillful analysis of several poems, particularly those of Kyabchen Dedrol and Dhatsanpo, while the Third Generation demonstrate a great deal of creativity, innovation and even subversion, their work nonetheless fails to escape both Tibetan literary legacies and a collective concern for the Tibetan nation.

In the final empirical chapter of his book, Lama Jabb explores the degree to which contemporary Tibetan erotic poetry can be said to be novel. Recent years have seen a proliferation of Tibetan erotic poetry, much to the alarm of traditionalists. Yet as Lama Jabb demonstrates, though contemporary erotic poems are relatively

graphic and detailed, themes of sex, passion, and love are far from a modern phenomenon in Tibetan literature. Exploring a range of literary materials from Kāvya poetry¹ to popular songs that fuse both literary and oral sources, he demonstrates the enduring legacies between past and present while also acknowledging some distinctive features of erotic Tibetan poetry today.

In his closing chapter, Lama Jabb reiterates his central argument - the necessity of appreciating "the persistence of Tibet's artistic past and living traditions in the creativity of the present" (231). Though also celebrating creativity and innovation in modern Tibetan poetry, Lama Jabb calls for more attention to the intertextuality and creative interplay at work across Tibetan writing as well as an awareness of the dangers of a scholarly preoccupation with moments of rupture and clear-cut distinctions between tradition and modern. He also highlights once more the centrality and indeed inescapability of the Tibetan nation as both a source of pride and pain as an enduring literary theme.

While this book demonstrates Lama Jabb's impressive and masterful grasp of Tibetan literary scenes both past and present, two points of shortcoming are worth noting. Firstly, though Lama Jabb openly criticizes what he argues to be the "male-dominated Tibetan literary culture where women as author, reader, and imaginative characters are totally marginalized" (199), very little reference to the work of female Tibetan writers is made in his book.

Though it may perhaps extend beyond the scope of the book, a second point concerns the influence of Chinese literary trends. For instance, the Third Generation bears striking similarities to the "Lower Body" (Ch. Xia ban shen) movement in China, both of which emerged in the early part of the twenty-first century. With both movements spurning literary legacies, emphasizing the here-and-now, and showing a strong tendency for courting taboo topics such as sex and desire, it would be worth considering how and why this overlap came to be.

¹ Kāvya refers to an Indic literary tradition that is characterized by its rich and lavish use of figures of speech, metaphors, and similes.

These two very minor observations notwithstanding, this book is a stunning piece of research that offers fresh and invaluable insights into the world of modern Tibetan literature. Lama Jabb is to be commended for his unparalleled command of Tibetan oral and literary works, as well as his rich, innovative, and thought-provoking analysis. A beautifully written and highly accessible read, this book was simply a pleasure to read and is recommended to anyone with an interest in modern Tibetan literature.